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ABSTRACT

Given the growing demands and intricacies of today's schools, teacher preparation programs must foster meaningful learning experiences conducive to meeting those complex conditions. Since teachers do not face compliant social conditions within schools, they must have optimal learning opportunities during preservice education. Teacher professional development must undertake the task of preparing them for democratic classrooms. This paper describes such philosophy as related to Fort Hays State University's TEAM 2000 program in one Kansas elementary school. Team 2000 offers early experiential training that gives preservice teachers first-hand experience in the dynamics of the classroom and teaches the demands of democratic teaching and learning. This paper highlights the benefits of early field experience programs as revealed by participants in the teacher education program. Students completed a survey after their first-year field experience. Their responses illustrated the many benefits to participating in the field experience program and described how the program helped shape their positive attitudes and guide their motivation. Keys to successful field experiences included enhanced communication, concrete experiences, triangulated assessment, positive environments, flexible placement, and solid partnerships among institutions. An appendix presents the field/seminar experience survey that students completed after their first-year field experience. (Contains 12 references.) (Author/SM)

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TEAM-ing Together Through Field Experiences: Implications for Teacher Educators

by

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Abstract

Given the unceasingly growing demands and intricacies of today'schools, teacher preparation programs must foster a meaningful learning conducive to meeting these complex conditions. Since teachers do not face compliant social conditions in their schools, learning opportunities must be optimally provided to pre-service interns. Thus, professional development of teachers must be grounded in a more pragmatic philosophy to be embraced by teacher education programs that undertake the task of preparing teachers for democratic classrooms. This paper describes such philosophy in terms of the merits of revisited teacher education programs through TEAM 2000 in a Kansas school. In particular, it discusses the benefits of early field experience programs as revealed by the participants in the teacher education program. Among other things, these programs aim to build school/university partnerships provide interns with multiple learning opportunities, and promote more democratic educational values in prospective teachers.

TEAM-ing Together Through Field Experiences: Implications for Teacher Educators

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Introduction

Given the limitations of traditional teacher education programs, it is important to prepare teachers who can play a more vital role in the 21 century schools. The newly reinvented teacher preparation programs actively engage preservice teachers in the culture of schools through a four-year program during which students are exposed to various educational settings. They are also provided with the opportunity to translate theory into practice through active engagement, reflection, and collaboration. Unlike the short-term traditional programs, TEAM 2000 offers a more realistic and experiential training that helps teachers experience first hand the dynamics of the classroom, and become more aware of the demands of the democratic learning/teaching contexts.

Within the conceptual framework of insinuating interns in the culture of the classroom, this paper will provide insight into creating effective conditions for educating teachers in a more democratic manner. It will also discuss the democratic values necessary for teachers to be active participants in the field-based programs. This can be accomplished through collaborating with participants in the educational environment, acquiring the necessary knowledge and skills, understanding the civic responsibilities of educators and education leaders, revitalizing democratic values in schools, and revisiting the role of interns and teacher educators to play a more meaningful role in society at large.

The findings of this research are derived from the multiple resources. First, the authors are participants in the teacher education program at the university level whose primary tasks include supervising pre-service teachers in the school sites. Their long

insinuation in the field along their observations of interns in schools are reflected in the discussion of the findings. Second, the participants are part of the assessment and research efforts to improve the teacher education program which has undergone many changes. Although the purpose of this paper is not to discus these changes, emphasis is placed on the benefits of the newly implemented TEAM 2000 Program. Third, the qualitative data findings will be presented in a form of personal accounts of participating students. These students were asked to fill out a survey about the impact of the program in their career choices and development (See Appendix A). In addition, the participants compiled portfolios, and participated in various seminars to substantiate relevant meaning conducive to their professional development as prospective teachers. Finally, the analysis is grounded in and supported by field-based research inherent in recent literature. Related literature is used to support the research findings in this paper.

This paper will present useful information for teacher educators working with interns in similar settings. In particular, several strategies to build partnerships with school districts and institutions of higher education will be presented along with educational implication for early field experience program designers. Moreover, the discussion includes: (1) providing a rationale for the newly revitalized teacher education program (TEAM 2000) in terms of new trends in educational reform; (2) highlighting the merits of the program in terms of meeting the professional and educational needs of prospective teachers; and (3) provide implications for field-based teacher educators as they provide links for learning through collaboration with interns, inservice teachers, school administrators, parents, and university professionals.

Finally, the collective efforts through school/university partnership, interns and pre-service teachers have the opportunity for nourishment and professional development. To promote their awareness of their civic responsibilities in various educational settings, participants must not underestimate the complexity of the demands of today's classroom

life. Teacher education programs can play a vital role in transforming schools for the desired societal by training students to be part of that process.

Historical Background

Field experiences for preservice and teacher education students have emerged as a critical need to prepare teachers professionally over the years. In fact, early field experience is seen as the capstone of teacher preparation programs (Slick, 1995). The rationale for immersing prospective teachers in the school site has always been justified in terms of the social, educational and professional benefits gleaned from this experience. First, teacher education programs aim to prepare teachers who will teach in schools that reflect the societal changes. According to Hopkins (1995), previous teacher education tried to respond to the complex societal changes that affect schools through field experiences. Hopkins (1995) also notes that focus of previous field experience approaches "originated with a concern that initial field experiences were occurring too late in the program" (p. 2). This led many to reconsider late immersion of student teachers in the field and encourage early immersion instead. Accordingly, integrating field experiences in the introductory phase of the participants' education is seen as a contributing factor to the professional and educational nourishment and development of students (Applegate, 1985; Sunal, 1980). Furthermore, with the increase of hours spent in the field, greater partnership is established between institutions of higher education and school since the more time students spend in the field, the more learning and growth take place as these participants engage in reflective thinking and competency learning (Denton, 1982; Hill, 1986; Hopkins, 1995).

The scope of extensive knowledge required for successful field experiences must not be undermined. Such scope has been prodded by NCATE guidelines that provide a structure and contingency for an extensive educational vision to link theory to practice. Such accreditation agencies as well as licenser guidelines provide an impetus to rethink the way field-based teacher education programs operate (Lange, 1995). Consequently, a more pragmatic approach to teacher education has emerged. This approach, deeply influenced by

Goodlad's (1990) conceptual framework, is multi-dimensional in nature and encompasses the knowledge base and competency learning to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Still, for a more a pragmatic approach to teacher education, participants at all levels (community, university, school, state. . .etc.) in educating teachers for the 21st century must develop field experience programs to meet the needs of all participants by providing maximum opportunities for learning and growth. These opportunities aim to help preservice teachers develop essential proficiencies, competencies, skills, and attitudes to adequately perform their civic function as teachers in the ever-changing classroom life. They are also conducive to the realistic expectations to deal with the current and future complexities of schools. In particular, the teacher education programs' task of preparing teachers for licenser along with creating "well-rounded" teachers requires restructuring and reorienting the responsibilities of these programs (Lange, 1995; Lange, 1990). To do so, we must revisit the role of teacher education programs and emphasize their importance in the early stages of preparing future teachers.

Establishing Rapport

Students coming to the field-based program TEAM 2000 at Fort Hays Sate University (FHSU) are required to enroll in seminar/field experience courses in the beginning of the school year. They are provided with feedback about the cross-categorical program along with the coursework in an intensive orientation. Also, the students initially provide a rationale about their choice to be in education and articulate the reasons for their educational career choices. As the students are assigned to advisors, supervisors, mentor teachers, and school sites, they start spending contact hours in the elementary schools. They start working with this support group to meet the goals of the field experience and the relevant courses associated with it.

Since the field-based/internship activity is overseen by many participants (teachers, mentors, principals ...) whose main task is to help the intern gain insight into the dynamics of teaching and learning, specific goals are articulated regarding the true nature and structure of related activities. The majority of participating students will be considered for admission into the undergraduate teacher education program, thus the overall goal of the internship experience is to provide students with the opportunity to:

1. observe and/or participate in classroom activities
2. be exposed to the real culture of the learning/teaching situation
3. get a first hand experience of the classroom dynamics
4. work with learners of various age groups
5. gain preliminary exposure to the profession of education
6. be part of the school community
7. work with students and other participants in the school setting

The goal of maximizing optimal learning opportunities for students in the early field experience programs rests heavily on the participants' engagement in the school culture. Speaking of the role of the interns in the field/experience, Roe, Ross, & Burns (1989) recommended that these students need to *observe* rather than *look at* what is going on in the field. They maintain that observing "involves close attention to detail, analysis of what is happening, evaluation of what is happening, and assimilation of new ideas into your existing store of information" (p. 46). In fact, it is made clear to the interns in the initial stages of their immersion in the field how to assume their roles as active participants in the field. Faculty members and mentoring teachers' tasks focus on helping interns to derive maximum benefit from this experience. Accordingly, interns are provided with the necessary feedback about the insight they get from the field. Regular seminars and conferences with interns provided an opportunity for intellectual and professional growth and development. They also provide a forum to negotiate relevant meanings and reflect on subtle behaviors inherent in the interactional processes in the learning/teaching context.

Moreover, systematic assessment techniques are used to address the students' overall level of participation in assigned classroom activities, their ability to adequately fulfill assigned responsibilities, and their overall level of positive interaction with the students. Interns are assessed in terms of their ability to play the role of a mediating agent in the socialization and acculturation of *all* students into the school community, their ability to utilize various resources and materials, and their ability to evaluate the progress of children by using several assessment techniques. Moreover, after meeting the outlined goals and expectations, interns become more competent in their ability to bridge the gap between theory and practice; i.e. they better understand the rationale of classroom practices in terms of what they learn from their coursework and vice versa.

Early Field Experience: Asset or Liability?

Appendix A shows the survey questions participants responded to after the first-year field experience is concluded. The responses illustrate that there are many benefits to the participants after participating in the field/experience. The participants revealed many factors that influence their professional and educational development in the program. These factors are the outcome of the students' personal experiences, practitioners' support, and other relevant ingredients. All of these factors have served as determiners of most students' accounts to continue the pursuit of their career in education.

Students have become more receptive to the idea that early participation in the field, because of the benefits obtained and goals accomplished. Respondents provided ample testimony to the positive results of this participation. Thus students have become more enthusiastic, amused, interested, and satisfied with observing the learning/teaching situation. The following excerpts illustrate the advantages of the early participation in the field experience in the Teacher Education Programs:

...Building a relationship, rapport with students and mentor teachers... The actual teaching... growing as an experienced teacher.

...Putting on a program... Doing fun lessons with students... Having students to read to me...read -alouds. Kwanza lesson.

... Being with the kids...experience... meeting new people; my relationships with the students... more responsibility.

... I loved my children... Being in the classroom... Being able to reach a child.

... Learning math games and teaching techniques...Positive discipline tricks.. The students and teacher.

... Getting to know the class/teacher....Teaching lessons... Having children look up to you.

... I really enjoyed my school; the students were wonderful...Attachment to children... Becoming so attached to my mentor and my class... Relationship with teacher... New activities.

... Growing in my confidence level... Being able to become involved in my class. New ideas...literature ideas... discipline... Growing in experience, positive attitude...confidence.

... My mentor teacher was absolutely wonderful! The school was great... I had a great bunch of kids.

... Coming up with fun ideas... Working up lessons... Helping with projects... Working with the students.

... My teacher and cooperative grouping... The total enthusiasm of kindergartners, individual remedial tutoring, and seeing students progress from nonreaders and writers to readers and writers.

The participants also cited several other reasons why the field experience was a rewarding one to their education. Their first hand experience early on in the program helped shape their positive attitudes and guided their motivation.

The participants have become more cognizant of the importance of the supervised site-education along with associated valuable opportunities to grow. The participants have emphasized the importance of being there and actively participating in the classroom activities. Active observation also helped them acquire necessary knowledge, skills, and strategies to perform their role in enabling students and facilitating the learning process.

According to the participants, becoming an intern early in the teacher education program puts the individual at an advantage of being an active participant in today's classroom. In addition to the advantages embedded in the above excerpts, other benefits of participating in the early field experience cited by the participants are summarized below:

1. Field/seminar provides multiple learning opportunities for learning and growth
2. Field/seminar promotes an awareness about the learning/teaching situations
3. Field/seminar fosters positive human relations and interpersonal skills
4. Field/seminar provides more insight into how learning and teaching can be matched
5. Field/seminar promotes necessary team and collaborative work skills
6. Field/seminar helps interns identify with diverse students' needs
7. Field/seminar helps develop classroom and discipline management skills
8. Field/seminar helps develop adequate questioning skills and techniques
9. Field/seminar helps develop advocacy for children and teachers
10. Field/seminar promotes networking skills necessary in the school community
11. Field/seminar helps participants confirm and/or rethink prospective career choices
12. Field/seminar enhances participants' democratic and civic values
13. Field/seminar instills participants leadership skills

Although all participants see early field experience as an asset, few participants have some reservations about it. To some, it might be a disadvantage when they are required to

participate in the field experience early on in the program. It must be pointed out that most, if not all, of these participants come from high school and must make swift and in many instances drastic adjustment to college life. So they may view the seminar/field experience as an added responsibility they are not ready for in the first year of college. However, several misconceptions about the profession in the area of education are eliminated as some conceive teaching as profession to be demanding and exigent. Yet, the early exposure in the field helps students determine the choices they are making. Moreover, students who have different attitudes tend to be dissatisfied, and uninterested in the field, thus leading to difficulty, and boredom in their participation in the field/seminar experience. Nonetheless, students' feelings deal with structural factors outside the premise and rationale for the early exposure. When asked about the most difficult and challenging experiences during the field/seminar, students' responses vary. The following excerpts reflect some of the reasons why some participating interns expressed such reservations:

> *... My most difficult experience was controlling the class during Spanish because they did not like Spanish.*
>
> *... Dealing with some of the interns. Too much competition between people!*
>
> *... My schedule was the most difficult thing... I was in class most days from 8:30-5:00... I spend close to 25 hours a week just in classes.*
>
> *... Dealing with younger grades-animation... Dealing with a child's behavior.*
>
> *... Getting everything accomplished by due dates... Very hectic schedule.*
>
> *... Accepting that I needed to learn how to effectively manage students behavior... I get nervous when teaching a lesson.*

... In the field, there was one student that my teacher had trouble with. When I would give a lesson, I would also have trouble with him, but I wasn't sure what authority I had.

... Going into a professional setting everyday.

It is evident that these and other similar remarks have to do with what is expected in the context of the learning/teaching situation. The exposure in the field reveals a set of misconceptions in the minds of some students about the teaching profession and what is happening in the classroom. Interestingly enough, some of the competencies are outlined in the assessment sheets provided to these students. They stress acquiring effective interpersonal communication skills, maintaining a professional appearance, attaining a high level of professionalism, and playing a significant role in the classroom by attending to the frequent difficult demands dictated by the learning/teaching context.

Generally, most students seem to be very satisfied with what they learn from the field/seminar experience. Despite its seemingly exigent tasks, early field experience--most students contend-- seems to be a rewarding experience in their professional and educational progress. It appears that the overall advantages of the field/seminar experience outweigh its drawbacks.

Early Field Experiences: Implications for Teacher Educators

The early field experience approach in teacher education programs, as grounded in research evidence, is deeply rooted in the notion of linking theory and practice. For teacher educators, it is also a pragmatic program that leads the way to the effective "making" of prospective teachers. The structure of such program is composed of a network of individuals and institutions that work collaboratively to achieve the desired educational goals. Incoming interns participating in these programs have the advantage of being immersed in the realm of the educational field to experience first hand the demands of the learning/teaching situations.

Since the "teaching profession must attract some of the *best and brightest*" (Lange, 1995, p. 73), preparing teachers for the 21st century schools is by no means an easy task. As teachers need to become learning facilitators, their preparation in pedagogy and curriculum must take place using alternative ways (Lange, 1995; Lange, 1990; Schubert, 1986). One alternative way prospective teachers can be "filtered" for this profession is through newly invented early field experience approaches in teacher education programs. Early field experience is the threshold of successful recruitment of effective teachers who will ultimately carry out their duties effectively and face the real classroom situational challenges.

In order to make the early field experience programs successful, teacher educators and program designers must keep the following ingredients in mind:

1. Enhanced Communication. Communication is one of the key elements in the program and is largely dependent on committed participants in the school community. Effective communication and meaningful interaction among participants in the program is of paramount value in building necessary links among various institutions.

2. Concrete Experiences. Learning takes place more effectively through experiential engagement of participants early on in the program. This allows them to bridge the gap between theory and practice. It also provides ample opportunity to real-life classroom scenarios that have practical value in facilitating learning.

3. Triangulated Assessment. Multiple sources of evaluation must be used to assess the acquisition of target skills and strategies. Such techniques as peer and self-evaluation techniques are productive tools that help effective coaching of interns in the field. Also such tool allow interns to reflect and critically think about creating workable solutions to problems at hand.

4. Positive Environment. Having a positive attitude is a prerequisite for effective performance. Participants must maintain an optimistic view and positive attitudes of

themselves and others in the educational setting. Only under such conditions does reciprocal learning as a life long process takes place.

5. Flexible Placement. Flexibility in placement and scheduling is required for the program to succeed. Interns' needs should be the axiom upon which the preparation program is based. This also involves rotation of interns over time from one context to another so that multiple learning opportunities are provided.

6. Solid Partnership. The healthy relationship among various educational institutions is the outcome of a strong partnership among these institutions. This partnership is largely dependent on effective leadership. Without this partnership, it is difficult to maintain the vital continuity in between schools and universities; early field experience programs form the threshold for school/university partnership by providing interns with multiple learning opportunities, and a wider access to community and family resources relevant to the democratic and civic function of schools.

Conclusion

The ever changing classrooms and growing challenges in today's schools require a more critical look at how teachers are prepared. Alternative democratic teacher educational programs such as those that implement early field experiences aim to meet the challenges facing prospective teachers. Although participants may find the process demanding, they recognize its rewards for them and the schools they are in. The critical and exciting benefits of early field experience approaches to teacher education cannot be ignored. These benefits have been outlined and revealed to guide the reform efforts in teacher education programs for the turn of the century.

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Appendix A

Field/Seminar Experience Survey

1. What was the one most difficult experience for you in the field/seminar this semester?

2. Please name the most memorable observation you made this semester in field/seminar.

3. Name the three things you most enjoyed in your field/seminar experience this semester.

4. What was the most challenging?

5. How will this influence your practice as a teacher?

6. Name one thing you learned this semester that you did not know previously.

7. When you design field/seminar how will you do it? Remember it has to coordinate with general education classes on campus, the schedules of the elementary school, the personal needs and preferences of the interns, and the requirements of the Board of Regents and the State Department of Education.